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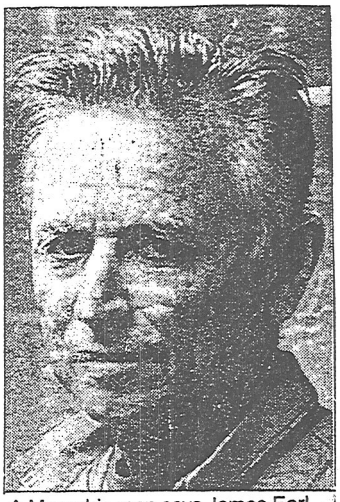

A Memphis man says James Earl Ray was not the assassin.

State may hear new story in King case

By Marc Perrusquia
MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — State prosecutors may look into new accusations that Martin Luther King was killed as part of a plot involving two Memphis businessmen and others, District Attorney General John Pierotti said.

Mr. Pierotti said he thinks the new allegations are a hoax, but he cannot stand against the groundswell of media attention since a British newspaper on Sunday reported details of a possible conspiracy.

Mr. Pierotti said his staff may interview witnesses after considering new information, including an interview that aired last night on national television with a retired businessman and former Memphis policeman who claims to know about a plot behind King's death here in 1968.

In 1968, Loyd Jowers owned a restaurant below the second-story boardinghouse from which convicted assassin James Earl Ray is said to have fired the shot that killed King, who was standing on the balcony of a motel.

In an interview with reporter Sam Donaldson on the ABC News program "PrimeTime Live," Mr. Jowers, 67, gave a different account of King's death. Some of Mr. Jowers' statements seem to be based on obscure pieces of the 1968 FBI investigation into the assassination, but his claim that he hired a trigger man who was not Ray has stirred new interest in the 25-year-old case.

Mr. Jowers told Mr. Donaldson he was part of a conspiracy to murder King and that he hired someone to do the killing.

Mr. Jowers' attorney, Lewis Garrison, approached Mr. Pierotti several weeks ago seeking immunity for his client and four others in return for naming a gunman and at least one other businessman involved in the conspiracy. Ray, who is serving a 99-year sentence for King's killing, did not commit the murder, according to Mr. Jowers' account.

Mr. Pierotti originally dismissed the new claim as a "sham and fraud." But the prosecutor said he's eager to listen to what Mr. Jowers has to say, although he vowed there won't be any deals for the former restaurant owner.

Mr. Pierotti said his staff may interview other witnesses after listening to Mr. Jowers.

In the ABC interview, Mr. Jowers details a conspiracy involving himself and another former Memphis businessman.

Mr. Donaldson: "Was he [James Earl Ray] part of the conspiracy?"

Mr. Jowers: "He was part of it, but I don't believe he knew he was part of it. But he was part of it; yes, he was there."

Mr. Donaldson: "Tell me about Frank Liberto. Who was he, and what was your relationship with him?"

Mr. Jowers: "Well, he was in the produce business. I met Frank Liberto when I was a policeman, city policeman in 1947. We've become pretty good friends, not real, real close friends, you might say business friends. Liberto has done me several large favors, so I owed him a favor or at least I thought I did."

Mr. Jowers goes on in the interview to say the man "asked me to handle some money transaction, hire someone to assassinate Dr. Martin Luther King."

Two weeks after King's assassination, authorities questioned Frank Camilla Liberto, then living in Memphis, according to FBI reports.

Mr. Liberto, president of the L-L-&-L Produce Co., "emphatically denied having any knowledge" of King's murder, according to an April 23, 1968, FBI report.

FBI agents questioned Mr. Liberto, then 51, about a telephone call in which he purportedly talked about killing King the day the civil rights leader was slain.

"He advised he may have made statements to the effect that King should be killed although he does not recall any specific statements made by him to this effect," the FBI report said. Mr. Liberto, who would be 76 now, is believed to be living in New Orleans.

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